

Response #2 to AAUP Statement

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As a contingent faculty member and activist, I needed no convincing that the Colorado Community College System Board should adopt the policy measures outlined in "Instructor Impermanence and the Need for Community College Adjunct Faculty Reform in Colorado." The pathway Stephen Mumme laid out for the board is the right thing to do. Indeed, I believe the gist of these measures (equitable compensation, due process rights, opportunities for advancement, and a voice in faculty governance), that in sum comprise the common ground in our academic labor movement with regard to contingent employment, should be implemented at all higher education institutions.

At the risk of appearing to sidestep these specific common sense proposals, I will comment on the subtext here — politics. I speak not as a representative of any organization, but as a veteran of the teacher wars deeply concerned about the ongoing degradation of our profession.

For eleven years I taught as an adjunct faculty member at various institutions (always more than one concurrently) in New York and California, and for the last nineteen years in a full-time, non-tenure-track position. Though I am appointed for limited terms I must reapply for, and though my wages are considerably less than those of my tenured colleagues who have been working for the same length of time, the difference between their terms and conditions and mine is far less than the difference between my adjunct colleagues' terms and conditions and my own.

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I feel keenly the huge disparity between my own compensation and job security and those of my adjunct colleagues who perform exactly the same work as I do. I know it is the same because there is no difference between the work I did in adjunct positions and the work I do now. It's arguably the same work all teaching faculty do.

Because I feel this unjust disparity so keenly, I have done what I can to improve the status quo. I helped organize a collective bargaining unit at a community college. Within a mature local, I have served as a union delegate, task force chair, statewide officer, and as a member of two negotiating teams spanning five years of active bargaining with the State of New York. I have presented on this topic at disciplinary conferences, at COCAL conferences, and at NEA and AFT higher education conferences and conventions. I have spoken in person to local boards of trustees, to state legislators, to Congressional staffers, to a U. S. Senator and to a Cabinet Secretary. I have been part of the teams that coordinated the national Campus Equity Week campaigns in 2013, 2015, and 2017. I have researched and analyzed conditions, submitted resolutions approved by national affiliates, and written many reports, articles, and position statements. These actions have eventually accrued power that was leveraged within my local to produce positive internal change; these actions simultaneously accrued power within relevant external organizations that was leveraged to influence academic unions from the outside.

I am not the only one who has worked steadfastly and strategically for many years to persuade administrations to treat contingent faculty more equitably. I am part of a decades-old and growing army of contingent activists and allies. Despite our best efforts, change has been slow and hard to come by. For example, it has taken several cycles of collective bargaining over twenty years and concerted political pressure by my local (the largest higher education local in the U.S. with about 38,000 members), assisted by our affiliates, to finally manage to institute statewide contractual minima for adjunct faculty in our new tentative agreement signed May 24, 2018. The long-awaited minima are an historic gain; however, the dollar amounts are disappointingly and infuriatingly far less than the pro-rata amounts we had aspired to achieve. Nor were we able to secure longer terms of appointment. The precarious nature of contingent faculty is a famously hard nut for any union to crack. Faculty who are largely responsible for higher education are not being treated with the respect they deserve as the learned professionals they are. Why is progress so elusive when it's plain to see that current employment practices are not aligned with long-term institutional priorities?

No rational, educated person would disagree with the premise that frequent faculty turnover is detrimental to good student outcomes. Nor is it hard to disprove an oft heard claim that fiscal hardship prevents administrations from raising salaries, given ample evidence such as that presented in this instance as well as historically widespread instances of

extravagant, non-instructional expenditures, some scandalously ill conceived. There is no legitimate reason for not paying academic workers equitably. Why then, is it so difficult to persuade administrators to adopt reasonable reforms?

One would like to think that political appointees and elected officials responsible for oversight of the public trust would attend to both the rational and the ethical dimensions of their administrative decision-making, especially when a strong case can be made that the proposed changes will actualize their institution's mission statement, but such is not the case. While management all too often seems ready to jump on the bandwagon of the latest harebrained "innovation" dreamt up by a chancellor or campus president looking to establish a prestigious national reputation, my experience tells me that no matter how much rational authority (much less moral authority) reformers on the ground display, the powers-that-be, whose attitudes about academic workers are often misguided by unwarranted assumptions, prejudices, and sometimes corrupt motivations, won't agree to adopt even the most beneficially transformative changes proposed by labor unless forced to do so by public pressure, and more importantly, by pressure from powerful individuals and interest groups. They have no inherent incentive to do the right thing.

One cannot overstate the significance of the power imbalance of the status quo — the political context in which college and university administrations operate, a context that makes them primarily respond to power dynamics among their wealthy donors, celebrity faculty, and administrative peers and superiors, not the rational arguments put forth by underlings, sad to say. Though some high-level administrators are well intentioned, they do not regularly hear from even a small percentage of the citizens to whom they are accountable. Like the rest of the 1%, they live in a bubble the 99% do not penetrate. Sometimes I think we ought to abandon restrained, rational persuasion altogether in favor of radical methodologies.

The authors of this article surely appreciate the political challenges informing higher education in Colorado. The AAUP doesn't just publish scholarly reports about the state of academia and position statements that articulate desirable reforms. I recently attended the AAUP Summer Institute (July 18-22) in New Hampshire in the company of AAUP activists, leaders, and national staff from all across the country. The sessions I attended were helpful and motivational, focusing on organizing and mobilizing union members. Wearing T-shirts with the logo of the University of New Hampshire Lecturers United, we all marched across the Durham campus and gathered for a large group photo in support of our hosts' efforts to negotiate a fair contract. Actions such as these do bring about change. How will Colorado AAUP move from scholarly to practical political persuasion?

Those seeking sweeping reform must expand efforts to close the gap between intellectual aspiration and practical instigation. We can build

on positive signs of change and some significant successes, such as the December 2016 publication of the Department of Labor's Unemployment Insurance Policy Letter 05-17 that resulted from a coalition effort initiated by New Faculty Majority, the national non-profit advocacy organization. This guidance letter clarifies what "reasonable assurance" of continuing employment for contingent academic workers really is and is not, ensuring that it should be much easier for adjunct faculty everywhere to receive unemployment compensation between terms. If every eligible person applied, institutions would have to pay a much higher price for their "management flexibility." I suspect more people have applied this summer. More and more adjunct faculty are organizing and demanding equitable compensation and due process rights. More stories about detrimental higher education employment practices are appearing in mainstream media. "Adjunct," with its connotation of exploitation, is now a household word.

I am hopeful that the force of the arguments made in this well-researched article, combined with community organizing and political pressure, including strategic, publicized disruption of the sort that has been practiced so effectively by the Parkland students over the past few months, will result in the CCCS Board's adoption of the worthy recommendations set forth by Stephen Mumme. How potent such a combination can be! Supported by their families and the unionized teachers of Broward County, the Parkland activists have indicted our whole society, saying, "you're supposed to protect us, but you've failed and now we're going to have to protect ourselves by changing laws or changing the lawmakers who refuse to change the laws." We have seen the far-reaching impact of their marches and social media presence. The November mid-terms will bring out millions of young new voters focused on the issue of common sense gun law reform. The blunt, consistent messaging of Parkland is a lesson for all of us looking to influence public opinion and public policy.

Let's speak truth to power in ways that ensure our message will be heard far and wide and taken to heart. People listened this spring when striking teachers effectively made the case that any teachers who are treated badly aren't able to do their best for their students. Maybe the mantra over the airwaves in Colorado should simply be this:

"Our college board is supposed to ensure the high quality of public education, but the board is failing us because it does not invest enough in the faculty whose working conditions are the students' learning conditions."

Couching an academic argument for equity in the language of popular discourse is a good first step toward mobilizing the public, but we can't stop there. Let's reach out to family members, friends, neighbors, and members of organizations we belong to, in an ever-expanding wave of influence and "boots on the ground" activism. Let's motivate every

concerned citizen to demand change. Let's get the word out and exert enough political pressure to persuade the CCCS Board to do the right thing.